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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000784

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE REOPENS BUT STUDENTS  
ARE SLOW TO RETURN

REF: A: HARARE 781

B: HARARE 752

C: HARARE 729

1. The University of Zimbabwe (UZ) officially re-opened Tuesday April 22, 2003 and most professors returned to work. Many students, however, have yet to arrive on campus, delaying the start of classes. The Ministry of Higher Education closed UZ in February 2003 in response to a strike by academic staff. No regularly scheduled classes or exams have taken place since November 2002, when the faculty members began the strike in protest against low salaries and lack of benefits.

2. The Ministry of Higher Education announced on Thursday April 17 that all University of Zimbabwe academic staff would be granted a retention allowance valued at 30% of their salaries. This allowance is to be backdated to January 2003. The 30% retention allowance was promised to all lecturers during negotiations in December, but was at first only granted to staff at the Medical School and not to other departments. The Association of University Teachers (AUT, the collective bargaining unit for university academic staff) discovered in February 2003 that the retention allowance was only paid to Medical School staff. AUT members outside of the Medical School then refused to give undergraduate lectures to protest the salary discrepancy. The Ministry of Higher Education responded by closing down UZ and threatening to fire and replace all the striking academics.

3. After announcing the 30% retention allowance, University of Zimbabwe Vice-Chancellor Levy Nyagura proclaimed that classes would resume on Tuesday April 22 (after the long Easter holiday weekend) and that all students and staff should plan to return to campus. Nyagura explained that a revised schedule would be implemented in order to make up for class time missed since the university was shut down in November 2002. Classes will now be held from April 22 until May 5 when exams originally scheduled for December 2002 will be held. The second semester will begin on May 19 with classes running until the middle of July and final examinations ending in early August. The next academic year will begin in September, switching UZ back to an American-style school calendar.

4. Press reports on April 23 indicated that although many teachers returned to campus, most students did not. Classes therefore did not resume April 22 as most lecture hall seats were empty. Some students may not have heard that the campus had reopened and classes resumed, as a large number of UZ students come from rural areas of Zimbabwe with limited access to news. Other students have undoubtedly been delayed by transport problems. The price of fuel more than doubled in Zimbabwe last week (Ref B), causing commensurate changes in bus fares. Some students may not have the money on hand to pay for the long journey to Harare. Others may simply be unable to find a functioning bus, as Zimbabwe's severe fuel shortages continue despite the price increase. Finally, politics may play a role in student attendance. The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) called for a 3-day stay-away this week to protest against the fuel price hike (Ref A). Some university students may be staying home in solidarity with the ZCTU protest.

5. Comment: The Government of Zimbabwe seems to have appeased the UZ professors' salary demands, at least in the short term. However, contacts at the university have told us that conditions are now ripe for student unrest and that further disruptions to the semester are likely. Most students receive loans from the government to cover tuition, accommodation, and

living expenses. After paying their fees to the university, they are left with about z\$60,000 (about US\$43 at current market rates) per year to pay for food, transport, books, and other expenses. This means that a student is expected to live on z\$5000 (about US\$3.50) per month. Bread, for example, now costs z\$300 per loaf. A medium-sized pizza is z\$2000. A round-trip bus ticket to Harare's high-density suburbs costs over z\$1000. A weekly newspaper costs z\$500. It is clear that students will be hard-pressed to survive on z\$5000 per month, and student protests to demand higher government stipends are possible.

End Comment.

SULLIVAN